From Cultural Diplomacy to the Global Cultural Economy: Building the Silk Roads of the Future*

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For more than two thousand years, the Silk Road network shaped Eurasian civilizations and it was the principal conduit not only for commodities and technologies, but also languages, religions, arts and knowledge in all its forms. The Northern Route which started in Xi'an in the Han Dynasty, and which since 1990 has been known as the Eurasian Land Bridge, has also been the route by which Hewlett Packard freights its hardware across continents. Since 2013 The Southern Route is now the Karakoram Highway, and the South West Route still links China to the emerging economy of India. From the days of the Han, and the audacious expansionism of Alexander the Great, to the age of the microcomputer, the Silk Road has been one of the world's greatest transmission belts of both commodities and knowledge.

The purpose of this article is twofold: (i) to offer an external perspective on China's "One Belt One Road Initiative" (BRI), and (ii) to question how, and by what means, we conduct a "dialogue with Chinese Civilization" which forms an intrinsic element within it. The focus here, then, is on culture understood in widest sense.

Where does culture fit into the narrative of the Silk Road, and how does it

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help us imagine the forms that Silk Roads of the future may take? For one thing, silk was not only a high-value commodity traded from China to the South and the West but also a currency and particulany, a symbol of the arts and thus of humanity's greatest achievements. In that sense, silk was a cultural as well as a commercial product. For us today, the Silk Road may also be regarded as a symbol of cultural connectivity, and Earth's intercultural information superhighway *par excellence*.

But what kind of cultural connectivity are we talking about here, and how can we best comprehend it and its potential for enriching human experience in the future?

For most time of the twentieth century, nations across the globe have acknowledged and deployed culture as an arm of diplomacy. All major economies have done this, and we continue to do so. And there is huge value in the conduct of cultural diplomacy. We display our finest qualities, the best in ourselves, when we celebrate our human diversity and promote the specificities of our rich cultural lives to each other, in peace and harmony. This is why cultural diplomacy is often described as "soft power". Of course, there is a darker side to this. In previous centuries, imperial powers enforced their domination of others by insisting on their assumed cultural, as well as economic, dominance over the colonized. In that more brutal, coercive sense, culture was very much a "hard power". In post-colonial societies, even day, the complex interconnections between "soft" and "hard" cultural power remain highly visible and controversial.

My contention in this presentation is that, while at one level "soft" cultural diplomacy remains viable and necessary as a form of international dialogue, as a multi-way street where we can all inform others of who and what we are, it is nevertheless now inadequate as a framework of analysis. This is not meant to be a criticism of the excellent work done by the British Council in the UK, or the Confucius Institute in China or the Cervantes Institute in Spain, and I'm proud to have been at different times involved in all three of those august institutions and it's more that we now need a different way of understanding the role of culture in the modern world.

What do we want the Silk Roads of the future to achieve? Is it simply to exchange cultural products that already exist? If so, then we can stick with the cultural diplomacy model, because that is what it does, and it does it well. If, however, we wish to create something new, one in which culture is an active, creative force, and one which is intrinsically mutual and interconnected across regions, nations and continents, then we need to think with a different model. I suggest that one way of doing so is to put the "cultural diplomacy" model to one side and apply instead the theoretical framework of the "cultural economy".

The idea of the cultural economy emerged principally in the discipline of Human Geography only in the last quarter century. Since then it has come to refer to many things – among them the excellent work done, for example, by the Shanghai City Lab that supports innovation and the careers of young creatives, or the various declarations made during the official visit of Britain's Chancellor then to Beijing in October 2015 that "culture means business". For this purpose, however, my definition will necessarily be broader.

Following on from definitions of culture promulgated by Raymond Williams, Bronislaw Malinowski, and before them Max Weber, we can argue that far from being a specialised or a narrow kind of human activity, usually reserved for elites, culture is in fact constitutive of social relations and a driver of social and economic change. culture may be regarded as a material resource and a social power in the way that eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophers realised that, in *their* moment of modernity, the political and economic power of the State was a material resource, thus giving us the idea of "political economy". Seeing through the lens of "cultural economy", cultural creativity, innovation, dissemination and engagement are activities conducted on a global scale, meeting global human needs, albeit in different ways in different places.

It may be helpful to see it not so much as "culture that travels", as in the cultural diplomacy model, but rather as "culture born of travel", a product of the continuous and multi-layered interconnections made possible by the trans-continental infrastructure of our Silk Roads. This is a culture necessarily developed in commonality, across frontiers, along ever more complex networks of transmission, all

of which are creations of our common will and our joint agency.

I mentioned earlier the debt we owe to the geographical sciences for the concept of the cultural economy. Geographers, after all, study space and spatial relationships. But maps, as we all know, are not two dimensional phenomena. Maps also have depth-time depth. When we look at maps, we look back in time, at a shared history embodied in things as disparate as roads, the location of settlements, patterns of land use and place-names of places Those maps also make us aware of the legacies of that history that are enacted in our daily lives and practices, legacies that spring from a shared memory of the past. That shared memory is the foundation of the cultural economy of the Silk Road. It's a living thing, a creative force, one that we should nurture and celebrate.

Is the idea of culture as a material force fanciful? Hardly. TERA Consultants calculated that in 2008 "the cultural and creative sectors contributed an estimated 4.5% to European Union GDP, and employed some 3.8% of Europe's workforce. Beyond this direct contribution to jobs and growth the report went on to say that 'these sectors trigger spill-overs in other areas such as tourism, and provide benefits for education, social inclusion and social innovation". The economic impact of culture in the UK is even more pronounced. By 2013 it was worth £ 15.1 billion a year (RMB 134 billion), a figure that had grown by 25% in the previous 3 years. One in twenty jobs in the UK's labour market are culture-related, and average wages in those jobs are well above the national average. Labour productivity in those jobs was also more than double the national average, reaching in 2013 £ 130, 800 GVA for the average fte wage of £ 28, 000 per annum. Even every lower-paid support staff job in the cultural sector was generating £ 105, 700 each for the economy each year. These, as Arts Council England noted in their July 2015 report, are "Premier League" numbers.

Elsewhere in Europe, too, culture and the creative arts punch well above their weight. After 40 years working in British Higher Education and the Cultural Sector, I'm currently co-directing a national research project on the cultural history of modern Greece. This project aims to combine a University, key national cultural institutions and cultural foundations, three national trade unions, broadcasting or ganisati-

ons, major private sector funders, banks and two Government Departments. Greece, more than any EU country, has been in the eye of the storm when it comes to an imposed regime of financial austerity. Yet cultural activity remains amazingly resilient there; theatres are full, novels, collections of poetry, new drama are still being produced, and more importantly, consumed. As I wrote in a British journal recently, Greeks are reclaiming their past, and the richness of their ancient and modern culture, precisely in order to re-establish their place in a broader world, in a global community of nations. If anyone wants to see the cultural economy dynamically at work, I would recommend they take a walk through the streets of Athens.

And let's not forget that it was the Greeks who, under Alexander the Great, had pushed Europe's reach deeper into the east, meeting the Chinese explorers and traders who themselves had pushed deeper into Central Asia and into Europe. To be equally effective as transmission routes, the Silk Roads of the future must also always be two-way streets, open to all influences and moving in harmony.

In addition, we can see that it is by means of these new cultural transmission belts that Chinese companies are becoming better known in the West. In addition to manufacturing firms such as Hisense, we see cultural industries such as *haute couture* beginning to make a significant impact, and perhaps even more so the products that have emanated from the Chinese mobile and social media economies, such as smartphones by Huawei, Oppo and Xiaomi, or Alipay, or micro-blogging sites such as Sina Weibo and Tencent's Wechat, which are all steadily gaining market share.

Why is all this significant? After all, as we have seen, there is nothing new in cultural communication across continents. But is there, perhaps, something new in its form, its reach, its complexity, and its transformative power? It's more than twenty years since Arjun Appadurni noted that cultural interactions had reached "a new order and intensity". "What is new", he explained, "is that this is a world in which both points of departure and points of arrival are in cultural flux".[①] That

① Arjun Appadurni, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996, pp. 27 – 47.

was a tremendously prescient observation, especially considering that mass access to, and engagement with, the digital economy was only really beginning to take off at that point. How the world has changed in those two decades!

One key process has been the attainment of a new, much heightened phase in the globalisation of very many aspects of the world's economic, social and cultural life. Writing of China's *Cultural and Creative Industries Reports* of 2013, Hardy Yong Xiang noted that "the elevation of the cultural industries to the level of national strategy" following the publication of the State Council's "Cultural Industries Promotion Plan" in September 2009, and the road map for cultural policy agreed by the seventeenth meeting of the Sixth Plenary Session of the CPC in October 2011, was "an historical necessity, a response to the times *and a global trend*". ①

A global trend it certainly was, given the huge acceleration in the power, wealth and global reach of cultural and digital technologies. In their wake have followed brands such as Google, Facebook, Amazon, brands whose wealth now exceeds that of many Western national economies. Dr. Justin Yifu Lin, in his keynote address to the Beijing Forum in 2011, emphasised the huge benefits that would accrue from such a globalised cultural economy, praising its "shining optimism" and its harmonised, benign effects on humanity. ②

But again, much has changed since 2011, not least in my own country, the United Kingdom, where in June of this year the narrowly-won vote to leave the European Union (by only 4 percentage points) generated deep uncertainty across the continent of Europe and beyond. Many commentators have perceived this process-along with the Trump phenomenon in the US-in some ways as a retreat from precisely that "shining" and "harmonious", interconnected and interdependent world that was still confidently being rolled out only five years ago. With the growth of nativism and protectionism in some of the advanced economies of the West, that progress can no longer be taken for granted. Now, for a global cultural economy to be

① Hardy Yong Xiang and Patricia Ann Walker, eds., *China Cultural and Creative Industries Reports* 2013, Springer, New York, 2014, p. 1.

② Justin Yifu Lin, "China's Economic Development and Cultural Renaissance in the Multipolar Growth World of the 21st Century," Keynote Speech, Beijing Forum, 2011.

made a reality, it has to be consciously created, it must have agency, and the energy and drive, vision and leadership of entire peoples and their governments behind it to make it happen. And, crucially, it must have the right superstructure, because its transmission routes, physical and virtual, will become the Silk Roads of the future.

That is why the most important word in my title is not "culture" so much as "building", the conscious, historical act of building a collaborative, interconnected and creative cultural world along networks of trans-continental, trans-cultural Silk Roads, old and new. At one level, it's possible to see the enormous benefits of such process, and indeed what that culture might look like. At the risk of sounding mechanistic and functionalist about this, one can argue that a global cultural economy is fundamentally about developing skills and knowledge that humanity across the globe now urgently need to tackle problems that we face, from climate change, food security, safe water supplies and medical challenges. To address these problems, we need to work out new ways for knowledges and skills to intersect with changing technologies of communication and production, patterns of consumer demand and our rapidly changing labour market structures and practices.

One essential component of building that collaborative culture is to research its history, its current configuration and its possible future shapes and forms. That should be done in two ways. One is to conduct advanced research into the cultural industries and their impact, social and economic. This involves the development of new knowledge, drawing on the skills and perspectives and energies of specialists who have deliberately situated themselves in relation to the collaborative ethos of the Silk Road. This work urgently needs to be done, for example, in such areas as heritage, where archaeology and history, identity, and economic growth (one thinks of tourism, for example) intersect.

The other is to conduct advanced research into culture as an economy, as a material resource, whose creativity can and must improve human lives, wherever we live. This is in no way to undermine local or regional or national cultural traditions-not that those traditions have in any case ever been static-and cultural diplomacy and the cultural economy approaches will I'm sure continue to co-exist. But

the impetus of the BRI will be to create new forms of understanding and new forms of action in the social and digital realms that genuinely emanate from a collaborative, and mutually beneficial, approach. Where cultural and intellectual interaction is concerned, digital, or virtual, Silk Roads are as important as physical ones.

To conclude, I suggest three ideas to think with. The first is technological, the mechanisms needed to facilitate future Silk Road transmission belts. While rail and shipping infrastructure, energy and food supplies are essential elements of the BRI strategy, a major component of the Silk Roads of the future will be digital and virtual. In the cultural sector as much as the industrial, common platforms with 'wiki commons'-type IP protocols, where primary digitised material can be drawn on in different, creative ways in different places, can underpin the cohesion of BRI partners across continents. A number of models already exist which can be built upon, such as *Europeana*. The second is the framing narrative, one that foregrounds interaction and innovation in a shared cultural economy as the outcome of countless collaborations across numerous fields of endeavour, in particular perhaps higher education, in ways that are non-hierarchical, continuous and not easily undone. The creative industries and cultural scholars need to be actively and positively involved as constitutive agencies in this process. Finally, we need to consider the most effective methods for developing such a shared cultural economy for BRI states. To achieve these aims, we need to reinvest in the idea of internationalism, as a stronger, more sustainable, and more inclusive form of "soft power" than cultural diplomacy. Power is the force exerted on one body by another, but the cultural economy is a framework within which power for good, for creativity, innovation and progress, can be developed and practiced in collaboration. And in that co-operative spirit, I ask all those involved in the cultural and educational spheres at least to weigh the value of these underlying ideas: *digital platforms* as a key enabling technology, *cultural economy* as the framing concept, *interaction* as the means of delivery, and *internationalism* – meaning security, peace, a stable environment, and improvements in prosperity, public health and social justice for all BRI partners – as among the most important outcome.

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